Peru Seems to Be Delaying Plan to Buy Supersonic Jets

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LIMA, Dec. 16—The Peruvian Air Force appears to be making a quiet, temporary retreat from its controversial plan to acquire a small fleet of supersonic jet fighter planes.

Sources close to the Peruvian military say the Air Force's desire for the planes remains undiminished. But they add that several factors — among them unfavorable publicity and an inability to purchase one of the planes they most want—have forced the Air Force chiefs to temporarily put off their acquisiton plans.

If so, the decision could be of pivotal importance to efforts to brake the jet-buying race that has hit South America recently. Over the past several months, Argentina, Chile and Venezuela have announced sizable jet purchases, and Peru and Brazil have been exploring the possibilities of doing so.

Of them all, the Peruvian negotiations have been most worrisome to those fearing escalation of the competition into a Latin arms race. This is because the Peruvian Air Force has made clear it wants planes of supersonic speed and has stubbornly resisted pressures to make it settle for older, subsonic models.

Aviation experts contend there actually is little difference technically between supersonic planes such as those being considered by Peru and the subsonic jets of close to supersonic range purchased by other Latin countries. However, this is an argument that overlooks two nontechnical factors.

One is the psychological impact upon other Latin countries that could be caused by Peruvian purchase of supersonic planes. Jealousy could kick off a new round of jet purchases by other nations.

The other is the high cost of supersonic jets — an expense that many feel cannot be justified in the light of the economic problems besetting Peru and the other Latin countries.

Originally, these considerations were cast aside by the Peruvian Air Force when it decided to buy new planes. Because of the military's history of intervention in Peruvian politics, neither President Fernando Belaunde Terry nor the Congress offered any visible opposition to the plan.

In fact, Belaunde said publicly he was in favor of the idea because of the Air Force's need to replace unsafe, obsolete equipment. Congress rushed through enabling legislation that gave the Air Force a virtual blank check for the purchase.

At first, the Peruvians dropped strong hints that they were thinking of buying a highly advanced British supersonic jet called the Lightning. They added that they were interested in the acquisition of as many as 24.

Many observers think, however, that the Peruvians really have never been serious about this idea. They say that the Lightning, whose cost per complete plane is estimated at between $2 and $3 million, is beyond Peru's means.

As a result, these observers conclude that what the Peruvians really want it the American-made F-5, a supersonic jet manufactured by Northrup Aviation Co. and designed specifically to meet the needs of smaller air Forces. It costs about $1 million. However, the U.S. Government quietly has decreed a ban on the sale of F-5s to Latin American countries until 1969. Despite persistent pressures from the Latins and some U.S. military advisers in the area, there is no expectation that the ban will be eased.

This inability to purchase the F-5 is regarded by many as one of the chief reasons why the Peruvians have been holding back from actually buying jets. A Peruvian Air Force delegation currently is visiting Washington, and has reportedly discussed F-5 purchases with the Pentagon.

The other inhibiting consideration has been the criticism appearing in both the Peruvian and the U.S. press since the possibility of a big jet purchase became known. Air Force leaders are known to have been taken aback by the controversy.